

PÉTER DOLMÁNYOS

Heat Signature (Seren, 2017) is the fourth volume of poetry by Siobhán Campbell, it follows the previous collection *Cross-Talk*, and the earlier *The Permanent Wave* and *The Cold that Burns* both in terms of chronology and poetic practice. Her achievements are marked by several awards, the most recent of which is the 2016 Oxford Brookes International Poetry Prize. In addition, she is a distinguished academic affiliated to The Open University, whose critical work is also significant.

The collection is divided into two numbered sections, but neither titles nor epigraphs are provided this time that would outline a tentative direction for the reader. The first poem, however, may provide clues as to both the tactics involved and the thematic intricacies of the collection. “The shame of our island” introduces a seemingly trivial fact, the killing of the wolf, but it quickly establishes a paradox since not only the last wolf was wiped out “but the two before that” (9) as well. The title of the poem is typographically separated from the first stanza yet the syntactic line is continuous, and the poem moves on to an anecdote on the imagined reconstruction of the killing of “the third-last wolf” (ibid), focusing on the aftermath of the event, that of the opening of the carcass and the subsequent questions that emerge. Yet the ultimate human curiosity is raised and demonstrated only after destruction has been done, the questions are preceded by action, which may render them no longer relevant, and the question closing the poem, “Is this wolf-ish?” carries an intended ambiguity as to the proper focus of the sentence: it is not decided whether the question concerns the no longer harmful body or the agent responsible for its current state.

This tendency for riddling and paradox is carried through the whole collection and the result is a challenging and complex body of poetry that never settles for neat and easy conclusions. Everyday, almost casual moments are suddenly upset by unexpected turns and unusual perspectives, seemingly comfortable pastoral settings shed their illusory surface to reveal menacing depths, and locations and histories are ultimately released from their usual contexts. The fractures and fault-lines haunting the poems of the collection are a result of the present context as well as that of Siobhán Campbell’s Irish inheritance, unsettled and unsettling at once, thus the collection retains an air of complexity and difficulty that continuously encourages return and rereading with the promise of new directions.

Indeed, the poems abound in contrasts and ambiguity, opening possibilities for different directions of interpretation. In “Lace” a careful and subtle difference is made between “lace” and “lacy” (20), in the poem “In their high cheek bones run the veins of a nation” the conclusion is a tense either/or type, in “Piebald” the intricate interplay of the lines “That was a world we lost before it named us” and “That was a world lost before we named it” (17) creates a haunting sense of being lost without direction. These ambiguities and divergent patterns are extended into pairs or possible pairings of poems in the collection with perspectives that answer each other: “Convexed” with “The Water level”, “Climb” with “Clew Bay from the Reek”, “Flora” and “About cows”, and there is a possible association between “The shame of our island” and “Weeding” too on the basis of the unwanted, with the conclusion of the latter poem perhaps redeeming something of the uneasiness of the former one.

Though several poems of the volume focus on elements of nature, there is a palpable refusal to romanticise the natural world. Drumlins, water or animals retain their physicality and their otherness as they reject humanisation, and whatever mythic association they may evoke, it is quickly deconstructed through the speaker’s epistemological honesty and subsequent rejection of common fallacies. The only exception is “Fodder” in which the cornfield appears to possess what may be termed an identity of its own, yet it is the title that works against the body of the poem by its highly pragmatic and practical expression.

One certain point of reference of the collection is the Irish context, which provides regular clear-cut and well-defined points of departure (or arrival). Beyond her self-confessed debt to the poetry of Padraic Fiacc and Eavan Boland (cf. Campbell, “*From there to here*”, 123-127), echoes of other Irish poets, mainly northern ones are possible to detect – Heaney (the readiest one is with “Bog Swimming” through the image of the hole that might be endless), Montague (the landscape in “Drumlins have no personality” or the motif of circling in “Piebald”, recalling the perspective of *The Rough Field*), Longley (the opening of “Periwinkles”) or Ciarán Carson (“Camouflage” has affinities with the Belfast sonnets) are tentatively evoked in the poems yet there is an uneasiness of accepting these earlier perspectives. What follows is rather a personal view focusing on individual experience rather than the communal; as a result, places retain their simple physicality and remain repositories of private significance.

A remarkable dimension of the poems is the music. The language is rich, there are delightful intricacies of rhymes and assonances occasionally giving the impression of casual patterns rather than a fully methodical design, yet this fits well with the tactics of challenging the reader to keep up attention instead of providing easy and lulling rhythms.

The formal diversity of the poems is also worth noting. Apart from the usual short-line lyrics there are several long-line poems, nearly prose ones, yet unlike Carson's meandering and digressive stories these follow stricter itineraries. Neatly organised stanzaic forms stand in contrast with looser compositions, which reflects the overall thematic organisation of the volume too. Titles are occasionally closely tied to the opening stanzas, forming units that are only temporarily separated by typography. The poem "The Latest" is composed of carefully interwoven repetitions of the same lines, creating a seemingly playful but at once somewhat unnerving atmosphere. In "Drumlins have no personality" the form reflects the idea that "They will not be domestic" (30) as the stanza divisions do not conform to a regular pattern. All these formal solutions mean an integral part of the effect of the poems, both individually and as parts of a collection.

The closing piece of the volume, entitled "Gatherer" is a return to a more pleasant tradition – but only on the surface. The pastoral setting offers a soothing conclusion to the collection as a whole yet the closing question retains the ambiguity that is present in the first poem as it can be a question of willingness as well as of agency, or merely the simple indication of curiosity involved in the Future Simple of the sentence. The subtleness of the sound patterning of this last poem is also remarkable: an observable rhyme pattern is established by the end of the poem (a nice pair of alternating rhymes), in harmony with the title that implies some form of ordering principle at work, yet the ambiguity inherent in the question, in the general form as well as in the actual one, maintains the tension that is a characteristic of the whole volume and which prompts and encourages returns to the poems for reassessment.

Siobhán Campbell

Piebald

Horses of the others,
the thinkers, the travellers,
tethered on the edge of new dual carriageways,
tied in the blank side of advance factories.
They verge on the flanks of dealers and shakers
where plans end in a thicket of rubble and stumps.
What are they for?

A yelled canter down the scruff-sides of dusty villages,
barebacked warmth sidling
and a hearts-beating thud between your knees –
where mis-remembrance is a dream to nourish,
where promise can out-run irony.
Not the hero horses, beauties black and brave,
who took the warrior to battle and will not return,
these are compromised, misled and confused,
heads too big for their ribcage, scrawny as the
screed of grass they pull.

Yet they must have been there from the start –
round the back of wired-off ruminations.
We pretended not to notice the occasions
when they recalled a field,
the hock-stripping speed of a gallop down a long hedge
where a quiver of legends misted into song.
But when they started to gather
in places built to house a desperation,
they seemed to trick our vision of a freedom.

That was a world we lost before it named us –
none of the promise, the clang
of potential,
instead the fetters that hold us to self-interest
the binds that make taxes out of failure.
That was a world lost before we named it,
part of a larger undertaking
to help us understand captivity.
Go back, go back they seem to say
but we have no direction,
rounding again the ring road to the city
as if we know the story behind the story.

Drumlins have no personality

they bland the land,
make one space much like another.
The road imposed by tar
could ribbon off at any moment –
pop open a corpuscle, a sup-hole of slippage.

In the dips between shale hills
is water or its suggestion.
The glands of a fish were found here
petrified in a granite slate.

If you could find where it ends,
this is egg-in-a-basket topography,
undulations for a giant game of hide and seek,
threnody for straw boys
and those who chase the wren.

In the few straggling bushes,
polished pockets of stasis.
What would it be to sink here
if these hills reversed,
plug holes to a swipe of earth?

They cannot be farmed. They will not be domestic.

They ask for nothing
but leave us a little frantic,
a touch of babble at the edges of our springs.

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References

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